THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER

The Southern Frontier: Britain in Antarctica

Preparing the British Antarctic Territory for the day the rules on its development are reopened.

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The proposal

Britain holds the largest territory of any of its overseas possessions in Antarctica, and the rules that keep that continent closed to development will not hold for ever. The Protocol that bans mining can be reviewed from 2048, and the states that will shape what follows are already building the presence, knowledge and alliances that will decide the outcome. Britain should do the same.

This paper proposes that Britain prepare the British Antarctic Territory for development in a way that strengthens its claim at every step and keeps it within its treaty obligations until those obligations change. Britain will say plainly that it would support opening Antarctica to development after 2048, under a binding regime that respects its claim, protects the environment to a high standard and gives Britain a decisive voice. Until then it will comply fully with the Treaty and the Protocol, and use the years before 2048 to make itself the indispensable party to any new settlement.

The programme has seven parts:

- **Presence.** Expand year-round British operations in the territory, add a second polar ship and replace the ice patrol ship with a modern vessel.
- **Knowledge.** Commission a national geological and geophysical survey of the territory and its seas as permitted scientific research, and hold the data as a sovereign asset.
- **Rules.** Draft a British position on a future regime for mineral activities, build a coalition of claimant states to defend claimant rights, make the case for opening the continent to partners who do not yet share it and commit Britain to block any regime that does not respect claimant states.
- **Gateway.** Develop the Falkland Islands into a gateway to Antarctica and South Georgia into a forward base, with commercial cooperation from Chile on support services.
- **Fisheries.** Build a British stake in the Antarctic krill fishery within science-based limits, alongside the established South Georgia fisheries.
- **Test bed and settlement.** Build a state-led frontier test bed for autonomous systems and closed-loop living, and create a lawful route for private settlement ventures to establish British stations in the territory.

- **Government.** Give the territory a more substantial administration that legislates, inspects and reports to Parliament on British activity.

1 Why Antarctica matters to Britain

The territory

The British Antarctic Territory covers about 1.7 million square kilometres, roughly seven times the area of the United Kingdom. Britain's claim rests on letters patent issued in 1908 and 1917 and is the oldest of the national claims on the continent. It includes the Antarctic Peninsula, the most accessible part of the continent and the part most frequently visited, together with the Weddell Sea and a wedge of the interior reaching to the South Pole.

Argentina and Chile claim areas that overlap Britain's claim and each other's. Australia, France, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom recognise each other's claims. Most other states recognise none. The United States and Russia recognise no claims but reserve the right to make their own.

Britain's presence is maintained by the British Antarctic Survey, which operates a year-round research station at Rothera, a permanent station at Halley and summer stations elsewhere in the territory. Halley has been staffed only in summer since 2017 because of instability in the ice shelf on which it stands, and its instruments run automatically through the winter. The government is completing a £670 million programme to modernise that infrastructure, including the £100 million Discovery Building at Rothera, the largest construction project Britain has carried out in Antarctica. The polar research ship RRS Sir David Attenborough, which cost about £200 million, is registered in Stanley and supplies the stations each season. The Royal Navy's ice patrol ship, HMS Protector, provides a sovereign naval presence and hydrographic survey, but she suffered a serious failure in October 2026 and returned to Devonport, leaving Britain without an ice patrol.

The rules that hold it now

The Antarctic Treaty of 1959 reserves the continent for peaceful purposes and scientific cooperation. Its Article IV freezes the question of sovereignty. Nothing done while the Treaty is in force can create, strengthen or deny a claim, and no new claim may be made. The Treaty has kept the peace in Antarctica for more than sixty years and has served Britain well.

The Protocol on Environmental Protection, agreed in Madrid in 1991 and in force since 1998, goes further. Its Article 7 prohibits "any activity relating to mineral resources, other than scientific research". The ban has no expiry date, but Article 25 sets out how it could change.

- **The review.** From 2048, fifty years after the Protocol came into force, any consultative party to the Treaty may request a conference to review it.
- **The threshold.** A modification needs a majority of the parties, including three-quarters of the states that were consultative parties when the Protocol was adopted in 1991. It comes into force only when three-quarters of the consultative parties have ratified it, including every one of those original states.
- **The condition.** The ban on mineral activities remains unless a binding legal regime on Antarctic mineral resource activities is in force. That regime must include agreed means of deciding whether and on what conditions such activities are acceptable, and it must safeguard the interests of the

states with claims.

- **The exit.** If an amendment to the mining ban is adopted but has not come into force within three years, any party may withdraw from the Protocol on two years' notice.

These provisions give Britain two assets. As one of the states whose ratification is required, Britain can block any change it cannot accept. As a claimant, it is entitled to a regime that safeguards its interests, although the same safeguard extends to every state covered by Article IV of the Treaty, including those that recognise no claims. The same provisions give the same veto to Argentina, Chile, China and Russia, and the withdrawal clause means that a regime blocked for long enough may be replaced by states acting outside the Protocol altogether.

A model for such a regime already exists. In 1988 the consultative parties concluded the Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities, which would have allowed mining under strict licensing and environmental control. It never came into force because Australia and France declined to ratify it, and the Protocol replaced it. Any regime negotiated after 2048 is likely to start from that text.

A contest already under way

The states that intend to shape Antarctica's future are acting now.

- **China** opened its fifth research station, Qinling, in 2024, and sends multi-ship expeditions south each season. With Russia it has blocked new marine protected areas in the Southern Ocean since 2016, despite majority support for them.
- **Russia** has conducted extensive seismic and geophysical surveys through its state geological company. A 2020 statement by that company estimated hydrocarbon resources in Antarctic sedimentary basins at about 70 billion tonnes, around 511 billion barrels. Russia insists the work is scientific and the British government has said there is no current evidence of a breach of the Protocol. Expert evidence to Parliament in 2024 warned that seismic data presented as science can also serve as prospecting.
- **The krill fishery** reached its seasonal catch limit of 620,000 tonnes in 2025 and closed early for the first time, after the conservation measure that spread fishing effort across the region lapsed without agreement on a replacement. The fleet is drawn mostly from Norway and China.
- **Argentina and Chile** each maintain several permanent stations in the area Britain claims, supported from gateways on the South American mainland a short flight away.

None of this breaches the Treaty. All of it builds the presence, knowledge and influence that will count when the rules are revisited. Britain's position rests on history and science of the highest quality, but on a presence that has not grown in step with its rivals'.

2 The position Britain will take

Britain will state its position in four propositions, and hold to them through every government that follows.

Britain will comply fully with the Antarctic Treaty and the Protocol for as long as they are in force. Every measure in this paper is lawful under them now. Britain will not prospect, will not conduct mineral activities and will not militarise the continent.

Britain will support opening Antarctica to development after 2048 under the right regime. Development means the responsible extraction of minerals and hydrocarbons, together with the infrastructure, fisheries and enterprise that accompany it. Britain will say so openly, rather than leaving the field to states that intend the same but say otherwise.

The right regime is one that respects Britain's claim. It must give claimant states the authority to license and receive royalties from activity in the areas they claim, set environmental standards in advance and make those standards enforceable. Britain will support reasonable sharing of benefits with other parties where that is the price of the three-quarters majority the Protocol requires. This is Britain's negotiating position rather than an entitlement the Protocol confers, and the draft regime in section 5 sets out how activity could be authorised if it cannot command that majority.

Britain will block any regime that does not. Britain's ratification is required for any change to the mining ban. It will not give it to a regime that treats the continent as a common resource to be divided by fleet size and expedition budget.

This position strengthens the Treaty system rather than undermining it. A credible regime, negotiated in good time by the states with the greatest stake, is the best protection against the alternative, which is withdrawal by states impatient with deadlock and a scramble without rules. Many will oppose any prospect of development in Antarctica, but the choice is not between development and permanent protection. It is between strict rules agreed in advance and an unregulated contest, and Britain's science and standards are the best guarantee that any future activity is conducted responsibly.

Argentina will present any expansion of British activity as a provocation. Every measure in this paper is lawful under the Treaty, and Article IV ensures that none of it prejudices Argentina's claim in law. Britain should expect the objection and proceed.

3 Presence that holds a claim

Under Article IV, presence during the life of the Treaty cannot strengthen a claim in law. It will nonetheless determine who has the knowledge, the infrastructure and the standing to shape the regime that follows, and who is in a position to act on a claim the moment the rules allow it. Britain's presence should therefore grow, and it should grow in the territory Britain claims.

Expand year-round operations

The British Antarctic Survey will extend year-round operation beyond Rothera. Signy, staffed only in summer since 1996, will be reopened as a year-round station, and a new year-round inland station will be established in the interior of the territory to support deep-field science, the national survey in section 4 and the test bed in section 8. Each station will be designed for low emissions and minimal environmental footprint, using the modular approach proved at Halley.

A second polar ship

The Attenborough cannot both supply the stations and carry out the sustained marine survey this programme requires. A second ice-capable research and logistics ship will be procured, smaller than the Attenborough and optimised for survey, so that one ship can remain on station in the territory's seas throughout the season.

Replace the ice patrol ship

The government has confirmed that HMS Protector will be replaced with a more modern vessel. Following her failure in October 2026, that replacement will be brought forward and funded from the defence budget as an urgent requirement. The new ship will carry out naval presence, hydrographic survey, inspection under the Treaty and fisheries protection, and will be based in the South Atlantic for the Antarctic season.

Aviation and the air bridge

The extended runway at Rothera can support a larger air operation. The British Antarctic Survey's air fleet will be expanded to support the new stations and the inland survey, and a regular air bridge from Stanley to Rothera will be operated through the season.

4 Knowing what is there

The Protocol permits scientific research relating to mineral resources. Britain will use that permission fully, because no state can negotiate a regime well, or act on it quickly, without knowing what lies beneath the territory and its seas.

A national survey of the territory

The British Geological Survey and the British Antarctic Survey will jointly carry out a national geological and geophysical survey of the British Antarctic Territory and the seas within it. The survey will map the sedimentary basins of the Weddell Sea and the Bellingshausen Sea, the geology of the Antarctic Peninsula, the bedrock beneath the ice sheet and the seabed of the continental margin. It will use marine seismic and gravity survey from the second polar ship, airborne radar and magnetic survey from the expanded air fleet and autonomous survey vehicles under the ice and at sea.

The survey will be conducted openly as science, its results will be published to the standard the Treaty expects and it will be notified in advance to the consultative parties. The full underlying data will also be held by the British Geological Survey as a sovereign national asset, available to the government and, when the rules allow, to licensed developers.

The continental shelf

Britain will complete the data needed to define the outer limits of the continental shelf adjacent to the territory. The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf does not consider Antarctic submissions while the Treaty freezes sovereignty, so the data will be held ready rather than submitted. When the question can be addressed, Britain will be able to act at once.

Climate and ice

The same survey will strengthen Britain's leading position in polar climate science, including the stability of the West Antarctic ice sheet and its contribution to sea level rise. Knowledge of the ice is knowledge of the territory, and Britain's science is a source of authority within the Treaty system that no rival can buy quickly.

5 Writing the rules for 2048

The regime that replaces the mining ban will be written by the states that arrive with a text, a coalition and the authority of presence and knowledge. Britain will be one of them.

A British draft regime

The Foreign Office, with the energy department and the British Geological Survey, will prepare a British draft of a regime on Antarctic mineral resource activities, built on the 1988 Convention and updated for modern environmental standards. The draft will rest on five principles.

- **Claimant authority.** Activity in a claimed area is licensed by the claimant state, under rules agreed by the parties, and royalties are paid to that state. This is Britain's opening position.
- **Authority without prejudice.** If claimant licensing cannot command the majority the Protocol requires, activity in a claimed area is authorised by a regulatory committee for that area, building on the committees of the 1988 Convention, on which the claimant sits with a blocking vote and a share of revenue. Where claims overlap, as Britain's do with those of Argentina and Chile on the Peninsula, the claimants sit together on terms that prejudice none of their claims. Britain keeps its claim in full while accepting that how activity is authorised before sovereignty is settled remains to be negotiated.
- **Environmental standards set in advance.** Activities are permitted only where an independent assessment concludes that the environmental effects are acceptable, against standards fixed in the regime rather than settled case by case.
- **Enforceable liability.** Operators carry full liability for environmental damage, backed by insurance and financial guarantees, building on the Protocol's existing annex on liability for environmental emergencies.
- **Benefit sharing.** A defined share of royalties funds Antarctic science and environmental protection, and may be shared with other parties where that secures the majority the Protocol requires.
- **Continued Treaty principles.** The continent remains demilitarised and nuclear-free, and scientific cooperation and inspection continue.

A coalition of claimants and allies

Australia, France, New Zealand and Norway recognise Britain's claim as Britain recognises theirs, and each has an interest in ensuring that any future regime respects claimant states. That shared interest does not extend to opening the continent. Australia remains committed to the indefinite prohibition of mining, and Australia and France were the states that abandoned the 1988 Convention in favour of the ban. Britain's diplomacy therefore has two separate tasks.

- **Defending claimant rights.** Britain will propose a standing consultation among the five claimant states that recognise one another, on the conduct of the 2048 review and on the principle that no regime may be agreed which does not respect claimant states. On this they already agree, and together they can block any regime that treats the continent as a common resource.
- **Making the case for opening.** Britain will argue for a regime that permits development under strict rules, and will seek partners for it. The United States, whose interests are served by a regime with rules rather than a contest without them, is the most likely of them. Britain will work to persuade Norway and New Zealand, and will not assume that Australia or France can be brought to the same position.

Cooperation on science, logistics and claimant interests will continue with all four partners whatever their view on development.

The veto and the review

Britain will make clear that it will not ratify any modification of the mining ban that does not meet these principles. It will not itself call for the review before Britain and its partners are ready, and it will be ready to call for it in 2048 if they are.

6 The southern gateway

Whoever supplies Antarctica gains influence over it. The main gateways to the continent today are Punta Arenas and Ushuaia in South America, Hobart, Christchurch and Cape Town. The Falkland Islands, closer to the Antarctic Peninsula than any of them except the South American ports, should become Britain's gateway.

Stanley as an Antarctic port and airport

Britain will work with the Falkland Islands Government to develop Stanley's port, fuel storage and airport into facilities able to supply national programmes, private ventures and tourism in the Antarctic Peninsula. The Attenborough is already registered in Stanley. The Sea Lion oilfield, which reached a final investment decision in December 2025 with first oil targeted for 2028, will build offshore engineering capacity, port services and a skilled workforce in the islands that an Antarctic gateway can share.

South Georgia as a forward base

The upgraded wharf at King Edward Point on South Georgia will support fisheries protection, survey and logistics as a forward base, within the island's marine protected area and the strict environmental rules that already govern it.

Commercial cooperation with Chile

Chile is a natural partner in the business of supporting Antarctic operations, and an expanded British programme will create work in aviation, fuel, maintenance and supply. Britain will offer Chilean firms the opportunity to compete for that work and seek reciprocal access for British firms at Punta Arenas. This cooperation is commercial only. Neither country will change its position on sovereignty, and Article IV of the Treaty ensures that cooperation of this kind prejudices neither claim.

7 Fisheries

The Southern Ocean around the Antarctic Peninsula and South Georgia supports the largest krill fishery in the world, together with valuable fisheries for toothfish and icefish. Britain has led the science and management of these fisheries but has almost no stake in the krill catch itself, which is taken mostly by Norwegian and Chinese vessels.

A British krill fishery

Britain will build a British stake in the krill fishery within science-based catch limits. The government will invite British and Falklands-based operators to bring krill vessels under the British or Falklands flag, licensed by the South Georgia Government in its waters during the winter season and fishing elsewhere in the region under the rules of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). It will support processing of krill oil and meal in the Falkland Islands, so that the value added stays in British hands. A British fleet, operating to the highest observer and environmental standards, will also strengthen Britain's voice in the Commission.

Science-based limits

The early closure of the krill fishery in 2025 showed the cost of failing to agree how catches should be spread across the region. Britain will press in the Commission for a replacement measure that sets catch limits by area on the evidence of krill stocks and predator needs, using the British Antarctic Survey's long-term monitoring of the fishery. Britain will argue that allocation should reflect the contribution states make to the science and management of the fishery, not only the size of their fleets.

South Georgia fisheries and protection

The South Georgia toothfish and icefish fisheries, licensed by the South Georgia Government under one of the most closely managed regimes in the world, will continue, and their revenue will continue to fund fisheries management and research. The new ice patrol ship will add to fisheries protection across the region.

8 A frontier test bed and private settlement

Antarctica is the closest place on Earth to the conditions of the Moon and Mars, and the technologies needed to live and work there are those Britain is developing for its other frontier missions.

A state-led frontier test bed

Britain will build a frontier test bed at the new inland station, operated by the British Antarctic Survey with the UK Space Agency and the autonomy mission in Building British Industry. It will test autonomous vehicles, robotics and remote operations in extreme cold and darkness, closed-loop systems for water, waste, food and energy, and habitat designs for long-duration stations. The work feeds directly into Power from Orbit, whose stations will be assembled and maintained robotically in space, and into the market for autonomous systems that the autonomy mission seeks to serve.

A lawful route for private settlement

Private ventures have proposed permanent habitats in Antarctica, including the domed settlement proposed by the start-up Praxis. Britain should welcome such ventures in its territory, because every British station adds to British presence, enterprise and knowledge.

Under the Antarctic Act 1994, any British expedition to Antarctica requires a permit from the Foreign Office, and under the Protocol every activity requires prior assessment of its environmental impact. Britain will create a clear route for private stations within that framework.

- **Designated sites.** The government will identify sites in the territory suitable for private stations, near existing British infrastructure where possible, and assess them in advance so that ventures do not each start from nothing.
- **A settlement permit.** A new category of permit will cover long-duration private stations, with requirements on environmental assessment, waste removal, emergency response, liability insurance and the eventual removal of the station.
- **Services on commercial terms.** The British Antarctic Survey will offer logistics, shipping and air transport to permitted ventures on commercial terms, so that private stations strengthen the national programme rather than compete with it.
- **British law and responsibility.** Permitted stations will operate under British law as administered in the territory, and their activities will be reported to the consultative parties as British activity.

Private stations must meet the same standards as national ones, and none may carry out mineral activities while the ban remains.

Ground stations for space

Polar sites allow ground stations to contact satellites in polar orbit on every pass. Britain will assess a ground station in the territory to support British Earth observation and space operations, as other Treaty parties already operate, for peaceful and scientific purposes consistent with the Treaty.

9 Governing the territory

The British Antarctic Territory is administered by a Commissioner in London and largely funded by the sale of stamps and income tax on those working there. Its administration should match the scale of Britain's ambition.

- **A resident administrator.** A resident administrator will be based at Rothera through the season to represent the territory's government, oversee permitted activities and coordinate the national programme.
- **Territory legislation.** The territory's law will be updated to cover the settlement permit, the survey and its data, fisheries and the obligations that British and permitted activities carry.
- **Inspection.** Britain will conduct regular inspections of other nations' stations and vessels in the territory under Article VII of the Treaty, using the new ice patrol ship, and publish the results.

- **An annual report to Parliament.** The government will report each year on British activity in the territory, the progress of the survey, the state of the fisheries and the preparation for the 2048 review.

10 Cost and funding

This paper sets out the shape of the programme rather than a full costing, which will follow. Its largest elements have clear benchmarks. The Attenborough cost about £200 million, the infrastructure programme now being completed about £670 million and the Discovery Building at Rothera £100 million. The second polar ship, the new stations and the survey would together be of the same order as the existing modernisation programme, spread over its first decade. Ships, aircraft and stations also carry running costs for decades, and the costing will set out annual operating costs for each, including maintenance and emergency response, alongside the cost of building them.

The mining ban may never be lifted. The Protocol's thresholds are high, and China and Russia hold vetoes. The programme is therefore divided into two tiers, so that what is spent first is justified even if the ban remains.

- **Measures justified under the ban.** The replacement ice patrol ship, which the government has already committed to, the reopening of Signy year-round, the Stanley gateway and South Georgia forward base, the krill fishery, the national survey from existing ships and aircraft, the territory's administration and the diplomatic work on the regime. Each pays for itself through science, maritime presence, fisheries, logistics or influence within the Treaty system.
- **Measures that follow progress.** The inland station, the second polar ship, the frontier test bed and the designated sites for private settlement. Each will be approved only when the first tier has delivered and the evidence from the survey and progress in the diplomacy justify it.

If states use the withdrawal clause rather than agree a regime, Britain will be far better placed with this programme than without it.

The programme draws on several sources rather than one.

- **Science funding** through the Natural Environment Research Council for the British Antarctic Survey's stations, ship and survey.
- **The defence budget** for the replacement ice patrol ship, which the government has already committed to, and for naval presence and inspection.
- **The Foreign Office** for the territory's administration and the diplomatic work on the regime.
- **Fisheries revenue** through South Georgia licensing, which already funds fisheries management.
- **Private capital** for krill fishing and processing, private stations and the commercial services at Stanley, with the state providing infrastructure and services on commercial terms.

11 Phasing

The 2048 review is a fixed point in the Protocol, whenever the programme begins. Phasing is set out in years from taking office.

PHASE	WHAT HAPPENS
First months in office	Announce Britain's position on the 2048 review. Bring forward the replacement of the ice patrol ship. Begin the design of the national survey and the British draft regime. Propose standing consultation on claimant rights with Australia, France, New Zealand and Norway.
Years 1 to 5	Begin the national survey from existing ships and aircraft. Reopen Signy year-round. Decide on the second polar ship and the inland station in the light of the first results. Legislate for the settlement permit and update the territory's law. Develop Stanley's port and fuel facilities. Open the krill fishery to British and Falklands vessels. Appoint the resident administrator.
Years 6 to 10	Bring the new ice patrol ship into service. Complete the first full survey of the Weddell Sea and the Peninsula. If approved, establish the inland station and the frontier test bed, bring the second polar ship into service and admit the first permitted private stations. Build support for the British draft regime among potential partners.
Before 2048	Complete the continental shelf data. Build support for the regime among the consultative parties. Decide with partners when to call the review.

Summary of measures

AREA	MEASURE
Position	State Britain's support for opening Antarctica to development after 2048 under a regime that respects its claim, and its commitment to block any regime that does not
Presence	Reopen Signy year-round, replace the ice patrol ship early and expand aviation, with an inland station and a second polar ship to follow progress
Knowledge	National geological and geophysical survey of the territory and its seas, with the data held as a sovereign asset, and continental shelf data held ready
Rules	British draft regime built on the 1988 Convention with a fallback for authority without prejudice to claims, a coalition of claimants to defend claimant rights and a case for opening made to the United States and other partners
Gateway	Develop Stanley's port, fuel and airport, use South Georgia as a forward base and open support services to Chilean firms on commercial terms
Fisheries	British and Falklands krill vessels and processing within science-based limits, a replacement catch measure in CCAMLR and continued South Georgia fisheries
Test bed and settlement	State-led frontier test bed at the inland station, designated sites and a settlement permit for private stations and an assessment of a polar ground station
Government	Resident administrator, updated territory law, regular inspections and an annual report to Parliament